DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 273 275 IR 051 591

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TITLE The New Role of the Librarian in the Information Age.
INSTITUTION Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 12 Oct 84
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the West Virginia Library Association (Harpers Ferry, WV, October 12, 1984).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Improvement; Futures (of Society); *Information Services; Learning Resources Centers; Librarians; *Library Role; *Social Change; *Technological Advancement
IDENTIFIERS *Alliance for Excellence; Libraries and the Learning Society; *Nation at Risk (A); Office of Educational Research and Improvement; Toffler (Alvin)

ABSTRACT

Libraries today play an increasingly active part in the community and in the exchange of information and knowledge. The "Alliance for Excellence: Librarians Respond to 'A Nation at Risk'" and the activities of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) reflect the expanding roles libraries can play in reaching the goal of a learning society and meeting the demands posed by today's "information explosion." The outcome of a series of regional seminars attended by representatives of the nation's libraries at all levels, "Alliance for Excellence" presents a wide range of findings and recommendations under three headings: (1) "Libraries and the Learning Society"; (2) "Libraries in Support of Education"; and (3) "Library Leadership in the Learning Society." Many of the recommendations are practical suggestions for making advances in such areas as curriculum, information skills, media services, professional training and adult literacy. In fact, OERI has already established library programs that have supported innovations in various areas of library and information science. Through this combination of efforts libraries will be torchbearers for improved learning as the 21st century approaches. (KM)

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"The New Role of the Librarian in the Information Age"

by
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Harpers Ferry, West Virginia

October 12, 1984

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Donald J. Senese

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It is a great pleasure for me to join all of you here in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia for this meeting of the West Virginia State Library Association.

This area we are in - Harpers Ferry - is, I believe, one of the most scenic areas in our country. It provides an excellent peaceful and restful setting for the many complex issues all of you are dealing with today.

Today, I would like to focus on and discuss the significance of the Information Age for Librarians, the publication of Alliance for Excellence: Librarians Respond to A Nation At Risk, and activities of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement in the library field.

Libraries, similar to other institutions in our society, are greatly affected by the change that is going on all around us.

Recently a freelance writer Chuck Cascio wrote in The Washington Post (May 8, 1984, "If You Ask Me: Let's Hear It For Quiet") about his impression of the library, a very traditional impression. Mr. Cascio noted:

> Not so very long ago public libraries were quieter than churches. If you had to communicate in a library, you didn't whisper - you used sign language or simply mouthed the words. Libraries possessed a quiet, unspoken vibrance - the energy of intellect nurtured by the nearly visible food of silent thought. The quiet was catagious - as was the energy.
>
> I felt smarter, worked harder, relaxed more in libraries than anywhere else.

Mr. Cascio notes that this situation no longer exists because libraries are located in shopping centers where they blend in with "arcades, pizza parlors, health spas and hair salons". He laments that the behavior acceptable in these areas has become commonplace in libraries and identifies the culpits who are breaking that tradition of quiet as the loud talkers, headphone addicts, movie goers, copy machine users, visitors in search of restrooms, student research groups and even library personnel who he characterizes as "loud and flippant."

There is an additional point to be made by Mr. Cascio's article: libraries are not what they used to be.

Libraries have become much more than just a type of exchange store where books are taken out and returned.

Libraries have become a greater part and a greater participant in the community and in the exchange of information and knowledge.

I became aware of this change when I moved from the city of Alexandria to the county of Fairfax in Virginia last October. I went into the Fairfax County library near my new home and walked twice through both floors of the library searching for that elusive card catalogue. I then realized why I could not find that wooden case of thousands of cards - all the library holdings were on microfiche neatly arranged in a notebook. I needed only to pull out the sheet of microfiche, insert it into the machine, and find the book I desired.

Even librarians are not called just librarians any more. The preference is librarians and information science specialists - a title more reflective of the new and expanded role of the librarians.

What has brought about this new role? I do need to instruct all of you that we are in the midst of an important transition in the history of human society - a move from an Industrial Age to an Information Age. Those of us familiar with history realize the great changes that came about with the change from an agricultural society to an industrial society, the changes brought forth by the use of metal, the invention of printing, the invention of cheap paper and the great developments of new sources of energy - steam power, electricity, and nuclear power. Look at the great changes just in the last century as we progressed from horse drawn carriages to steam trains and

boats to automobiles to airplanes and to space shuttles. In 1950 a movie showing "Journey to the Moon" was a fantasy, a flight of fancy and fiction; it had become a reality within a quarter of a century.

While during the Industrial Age, we stressed turning out specific products, the Information Age puts a premium on the exchange of information.

We are talking about massive amounts of information. During the Industrial Age, we had to concern ourselves about the possibilities of running out of certain resources - wood, coal, oil. During the Information Age we have a renewable resource - information. Our problem is not running out of it; it is a problem of having too much, a problem of drowning in it. We are inundated with information as we search diligently for knowledge.

Where once the sources and amounts of information were limited, we now have an abundance of information and must separate the useful information for us from the less useful. We are truly in an age of "information explosion" or "information overload."

This information puts a special mission, an elevated task, a higher calling for those involved in the field of libraries and information science.

Alvin Toffler, famous for The Third Wave and other books analyzing future development, noted recently that millions of words had been devoted to the Information Revolution but very little analysis had been given to why we are entering such an age. Observing that it is always difficult to establish a causation of any great historical event, he notes that

> the hidden fuel of the Information Revolution is a combustive mixture of diversity and accelerated change.

Let me share with you Toffler's analysis. He notes that since the mid-1950s we have experienced the crack up of the old industrial mass society and in scores of fields are witnessing more diversity and deepening diversity--a

more variety of types, sizes and models of goods and services, more varied technical processes and greater varieties of corporate organizational forms, military weapons, and political - pressure groups of all stripes.

In a very perceptive observation, Toffler writes that the common intellectual explanation stated that technology was depriving us of our individuality and through novels and science fiction stories it was maintained that the more advanced our technologies, the more uniform and standardized we would become. He then adds, however, that the truly revolutionary change in our lifetime has been just the opposite--we are not becoming more alike but the old mass structures and processes of our industrial society are breaking apart and being replaced in turn by a more complex social system. We are moving away for "homogenization" to "heterogenization." He writes:

> In commerce, we are moving from mass marketing to market segmentation. In society we are moving from the nuclear family as the single, socially approved model of family life to a variety of family forms. In communications, we see the once powerful broadcast networks losing audiences, while cable and alternative media--all based on small, rather than mass audiences--gain. We are beginning to break the grip of mass media as we move beyond the stage of mass society.

How does this affect all of you? Toffler pinpoints your role in this changing society:

> In short, the heterogeneity of the new society demands higher level of information exchange than did the homogeneity of a mass society. The information explosion and the new information technologies are a response to this need.
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> The result: a fantastic proliferation of information on every conceivable topic and a concurrent burst of new electronic inventions for rapidly storing, coding, classifying, manipulating and communicating information.

The library of the Information Age is no longer a quiet place. It is not a place where a variety of age groups share long tables pouring over encyclopedias and books. It is more likely to have a young student watching a program on a computer, an unemployed man or woman seeking information on area job opportunities, adults of various ages taking literacy classes, and senior citizens seeking books to acquire new skills or pursue some long hidden ambition.

This brings me to a very exciting project which emerged from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, through one of OERI's components the Center for Libraries and Education Improvement--the Alliance for Excellence project.

When the U.S. Education Department in April of 1983 released the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education entitled A Nation at Risk, it came similar to a storm on the American scene. The report presented not an abundance of new information but it had crystalized a feeling, a perception, a conclusion shared by a growing number of Americans--that somehow our schools were not performing at our expected level of performance.

A Nation at Risk talked of "a rising tide of mediocrity" in our schools, "unilateral educational disarmament," "mediocre educational performance," and informed us that the "once unchallenged preeminence" of the United States in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation was being "overtaken by competitors through the world." A flood of other reports soon after raised many of the same issues.

Because A Nation at Risk was a short report--thirty-six pages--and because the topic was so large and the need so great for it to be available and read by as many people as possible, some important issues or groups had to be left out or just mentioned in passing. We all realize that one of the most important issue is the role of libraries and one of the most important groups are librarians and information science specialists.

We began in September, 1983 to initiate a series of small regional seminars to bring together librarians, educators, patrons, and other interested groups to identify the most effective role for libraries in the goal suggested by the report of the National Commission--a Lifelong Learning Society.

A national advisory board, consisting of presidents and executive directors of the nation's major library and information science societies, was established. The board's deliberations led to the preparation of five key position papers on specialized aspects of library and information science, and were targeted to the findings of the Commission. The board made significant recommendations concerning the content, format and participation for each of five seminars, which dealt with public library service, school library service, academic library service, library and information science education, and library linkages and cooperative activity.

Participants at the seminars were broadly representative of the nation's libraries, elementary and secondary schools, colleges and universities, and citizens who were knowledgeable about the role of libraries in our society. Their deliberations focussed on the Commission's report and the prepared issue papers, and led to a wide range of findings and recommendations. These seminars were held in Boston, Chicago, Dallas, Berkeley and Washington, D.C.

The conclusion of this initiative is the report Alliance for Excellence, a land-mark report to librarians, information scientists, educators, and the general public as to what roles various types of libraries can play towards the fuller realization of a Learning Society, the improvement of the nation's schools and colleges, and the more efficient and effective handling of information and knowledge in support of learning. The report was released at the end of July, 1984.

In the short time it has been out, this report has made a great impact and I believe we are going to see a greater impact in the days, months, and years ahead. It is a concise, practical and useful guide; it is an excellent companion to A Nation at Risk showing how the library community can help reverse the tide of mediocrity affecting our schools and once more help us climb that mountain toward excellence, academic achievement, and accomplishment.

The report is divided into three major segments: (1) Libraries and the Learning Society, addresses the general public as to the pivotal role the library must play as a learning center in support of both formal and informal learning and in support of the educational renewal recommendations in A Nation at Risk; (2) Libraries in Support of Education, focuses on the library and information science profession with a series of specific recommendations as to how the Nation's libraries can remedy the current plight of education and achieve larger prominence as integral forces in the education of all citizens; and (3) Library Leadership in the Learning Society, directs leaders in the library and information science profession to focus on the recommendations presented, and then to take the initiative through assessment, planning,

reform, and more dynamic interaction within their communities to build a stronger and more effective library system which will impact on both education and society.

Unlike other reports of the past, this one is not a call for massive new spending or a wish list for remaking every library overnight into a highly sophisticated, technologically oriented media center. It is practical; it is specific; and it is going to take much commitment on the part of librarians and information science specialists as well as States, communities, businesses, users of library services, and professional associations to bring about meaningful change.

Libraries are clearly identified in A Nation at Risk as a key institution to bring about the Learning Society, the opportunity and choice for all to learn throughout life.

I do not want to go into specific detail for all the recommendations. I would like to cite some of these recommendations:

-- the curriculum of elementary and secondary schools should be strengthened for teaching the effective use of information sources, including libraries.

-- students should be tested for competency in information skills.

-- libraries as well as state educational and library agencies should adopt more rigorous and measurable standards for school library media services.

-- library media centers, public libraries and academic libraries should be open as much as possible to provide expanded time available for learning.

-- school media specialists should have a broad general education that is geared to meet the challenges of the Information Age.

-- candidates for teacher or school administrator should receive meaningful instruction in the role and activity of a school library media center.

-- libraries should become active in adult literacy education programs.

I urge all of you to read that report Alliance for Excellence carefully and share it with your colleagues.

As a former college teacher, researcher and writer, I have always appreciated the central role libraries play in our learning process. As Assistant Secretary for Educational Research and Improvement, I have in the past three years acquired a great appreciation of the significant contribution librarians and information science specialists are making to creating a better informed society in our nation.

During the past three years in our library programs we have:

(1) reached out to new people in the library field to bring in fresh and innovative perspectives to the reading of the grants for our library program proposals.

(2) We have restructured our panels on research library grants so there is a twofold process. Proposals are selected for review by geographic region; then these proposals are reviewed by another panel for outstanding ones in each geographic area. This process has provided a broader choice of projects from which to choose and avoids the possibility of most awards going to only 2 or 3 major geographic areas.

(3) We have identified projects in our Higher Education II-B Research and Demonstration Projects to assist the library community in a practical and useful manner. In 1982 and 1983, we have supported projects identifying new directions in library and information science education (scheduled to be completed in December of 1984), the diffusion of innovations in library and information science (also expected to be completed December, 1984), a focus on the role of libraries in creating and providing viewtext information services, and a historical review of the contributions made to the library community by recipients of the library fellowship program (since its initiation in 1965). In 1984 our major project has been the Libraries and Learning Society Project which led to the publication of Alliance for Excellence. In addition, we are supporting a project with the American Library Association to explore procedures and guidelines for participation of a variety of associations in the accreditation of programs in library and information society.

The Office of Educational Research and Improvement is an office which coordinates research, statistics gathering and dissemination programs for the U.S. Education Department. The Office of Educational Research and Improvement is participating in a project with two of its components, the Center for Libraries and Education Improvement and the National Center for Education Statistics, with the Library of Congress's Center for the Book. This project is a fascinating one and will have a long term significance for all of us. It is a project to study the role of the book in the future and the influence the computer and video technologies may have on the book, reading, and the printed word. The report will be released to Congress and the public later this year.

(4) Our National Center for Education Statistics collects data on libraries. We are in the process of having a survey taken by NCES on the use of computers in libraries, the type of software available and the plans of libraries to initiate or expand their computer services.

(5) And OERI has begun preliminary work carrying out one of the major suggestions of Alliance for Excellence--a feasibility study on an assessment of libraries, research and public. Limited studies on an inventory of our libraries were carried on in 1955 and in 1975; it is time to explore the possibility of another major study, a partnership among the federal government, private associations, and the private sector.

All of you are truly keepers of the flame in the lamp of learning. We must make that light shine brighter so that learning will once again be bright on the horizon of our society's goals and objectives. All of you in this Information Age will be depended upon to be torchbearers for improved learning as we approach the 21st century.

I would like to leave you with a quote on libraries from that eminent historian Daniel Boorstin, presently the Librarian of Congress. It appears on page 45 of Alliance for Excellence and it so well reflects the true meaning of the library. Unlike the image of Mr. Chuck Cascio who yearned for the reestablishment of the one tradition which to him personified a library's charm--quiet, Dr. Boorstin's words reflect a more open concept of what a library should be:

> Libraries remain the meccas of self-help, the most open of open universities---where there are no entrance examinations and no diplomas, and where one can enter at any age.